

# Getting Started in Education Organizing

RESOURCES AND STRATEGIES

Center for Education Organizing



Annenberg  
Institute for  
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

## THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION ORGANIZING

The Center for Education Organizing is a project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University that supports and amplifies local and national demands for educational justice in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. The Center integrates the expertise of a university-based research center, years of on-the-ground experience supporting education organizing, and our longstanding reputation as a seasoned convener of diverse education stakeholders.

Center staff provide research, policy analysis, and training to support individual groups and national networks to meaningfully engage in education reform. The Center also facilitates alliance building among education organizing groups and between those groups and other stakeholders, such as civil rights and advocacy organizations, teachers unions, academics, and education researchers.

For more information, see <[www.annenberginstitute.org/educationorganizing](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/educationorganizing)> or e-mail [educationorganizing@brown.edu](mailto:educationorganizing@brown.edu).

## THE ANNENBERG INSTITUTE FOR SCHOOL REFORM AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is a national policy-research and reform-support organization, affiliated with Brown University, that focuses on improving conditions and outcomes for all students in urban public schools, especially those attended by traditionally under-served children. The Institute's vision is the transformation of traditional school systems into "smart education systems" that develop and integrate high-quality learning opportunities in all areas of students' lives – at school, at home, and in the community.

The Institute conducts research; works with a variety of partners committed to educational improvement to build capacity in school districts and communities; and shares its work through print and Web publications. Rather than providing a specific reform design or model to be implemented, the Institute's approach is to offer an array of tools and strategies to help districts and communities strengthen their local capacity to provide and sustain high-quality education for all students.

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## Introduction

Over the past two decades, community organizing has emerged as an effective force for school improvement. From a few groups working on local school improvement in the 1980s, scholars now estimate that nearly 500 community groups are organizing for school improvement and education reform (Warren & Mapp 2011). These groups organize parents, community residents, and young people in urban, suburban, and rural areas across the country. They include large, multi-issue groups as well as groups dedicated solely to education organizing. Affiliates of every national organizing network, as well as scores of independent groups, are engaged in education campaigns.

In the context of shrinking education funding, stubborn opportunity and achievement gaps between low-income and wealthy children and between children of color and White children, and polarizing debate on school reform, community organizing offers a methodology for parents and community members to effect meaningful change for the students who've been mostly poorly served by our school systems. Research has found that education organizing has increased equity, improved teachers' working conditions, built stronger relationships between schools and families, and improved achieve-

ment and graduation rates (Gold, Simon & Brown 2002; Shirley 2002, 2009; Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009; Warren 2001, 2010; Warren & Mapp 2011). Among other reforms, organizing groups have won:

- hundreds of millions of dollars in facilities improvements and new school buildings
- policies and resources to support parent engagement
- new instructional programs and new small schools
- improved access to rigorous courses
- equitable distributions of highly qualified teachers

- transportation, health care, and counseling supports that students need to succeed in school

Education organizing draws heavily on the lessons of community organizing around housing, neighborhood safety, jobs, and economic development. But in many ways education organizing is more complicated than work on those issues. The process of teaching and learning is complex and shaped by dozens of factors – both inside and outside of schools. Districts and schools are often highly bureaucratic and resistant to change, and those that have a history of failure often have deeply rooted dysfunctional cultures.





Education funding and policy are shaped by a complex web of federal, state, and local funding and regulations, making targets hard to identify. Because parents and community members do not “live” inside schools the way tenants live inside buildings – and because many schools and systems actively discourage parent participation – it can be challenging for parents and community members to develop a nuanced understanding of local education issues.

Staff of the Center for Education Organizing at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) at Brown University have assisted community efforts to improve neighborhood schools in New York City for the last fifteen years. AISR research staff have also conducted groundbreaking national studies documenting the field of community organizing for school reform and its impact on schools.<sup>1</sup> Based on AISR’s expertise, this publication outlines strategies and resources for groups considering education organizing. It is intended mainly for community organizations that have some experience with base building and organizing. It explores the ways in which education differs from other issue areas, how to gather data and research on local schools and schooling issues, how to engage local parents, and approaches to working with educators and other allies. Throughout, we provide examples drawn from a range of organizing groups across the country and

links to other resources. While each organization, school, district, and state is different, there are a number of common questions and considerations that community organizing groups working to improve schools can begin with.

We draw our examples largely from urban school reform organizing, both because our experience has been mainly in New York City and other large cities and because the scholarship on education organizing has largely emphasized urban groups. Rural groups have done excellent education work, however. Please see the resources section at the end of this brief for examples of rural organizing.

<sup>1</sup> See [www.annenberginstitute.org/publication/organized-communities-stronger-schools](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/publication/organized-communities-stronger-schools) for the series of reports “Organized Communities, Stronger Schools” by AISR staff, based on a six-year research study in seven sites.

# Why Tackle Education?

Many organizing groups active in education organizing have a track record of successful organizing on other issues, turning to organizing around school improvement after a long history of working on housing, safety, or local economic development. Other groups began as community-based organizations (CBOs) focused on providing services – housing, youth development, or after-school care, for example – and shifted their model to include organizing in response to the concerns and interest of the people they served. Groups who worked to restore neighborhood safety and renovate housing often found that crumbling, low-quality schools, instead of being centers of neighborhood life, were driving families away and threatening community stability. In each of these cases, organizing for better schools was a natural extension of the work these groups were already doing.

A free, public education is held up in the United States as the great equalizer and as the pathway out of poverty for immigrants and children growing up in low-income neighborhoods. Research bears out that access to high-quality education is crucial for children and their communities. The lifetime earnings of a college graduate exceed those of a high school graduate by more than a

million dollars (National Center for Education Statistics 2011). Higher educational achievement correlates with higher levels of civic engagement, better health, and longevity (Adams 2002; Davila & Mora 2007); on the other hand, high school dropouts are incarcerated at far higher rates than high school and college graduates (Western, Schiraldi & Zeidenberg 2003).

Yet the United States stands out among developed countries for its vast disparities in educational opportunities by race and income (Darling-Hammond 2010). Within the same state, wealthy districts often spend twice as much per student as low-income districts. These inequities result in large gaps in achievement, high school completion, and college access and success between low-income and affluent children, and between children of color and White children. Rather than leveling the playing field, under-funded and low-quality schools reproduce and reinforce the very problems that communities organize themselves to tackle – poverty, lack of access to decent jobs, over-incarceration, etc.

Decades of school reform across the country have resulted in only incremental improvements and have failed to narrow severe racial and class achievement gaps.

School reforms often focus on technical changes without considering local context or building the trust needed to sustain improvement, and they rarely acknowledge huge inequities in resources and power (Oakes & Rogers 2006). In the past decade, a market-based approach to education favored by national foundations, policy institutes, and federal education decision-makers has intensified. This approach views competition and a system of rewards and sanctions – usually based on standardized test results – as the key path to schooling improvement. Market-based policies like teacher merit pay, school closure, vouchers, and the rapid expansion of charter schools reduce parents' role to that of individual consumers and leave little room for community input or participation. The emphasis on narrow test-based accountability encourages parents and teachers to blame each other for school failure.

Community organizing offers an alternative vision for school reform. Rather than focusing on competition, organizing groups work to mobilize the *collective* capacity and power of low-income and working-class communities of color to demand that all students have access to good schools. Organizing groups view school failure in a larger context of disinvestment in and privatization of public services that intensifies economic inequality. Rather than trusting competition and market forces to spur improvement,

#### EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

### Different Paths into Education Organizing

**Inner City Struggle** (ICS), a community-based organization in East Los Angeles, focuses on building the power of youth and families to collectively work for economic, social, and educational justice. ICS has a holistic approach to creating education justice; they fight for systemic change and also provide services (after-school and college access programs) to their community. This approach has led to many wins, including the building of a new elementary school, a new high school, and a new adult school for East Los Angeles.

For more information: [www.innercitystruggle.org](http://www.innercitystruggle.org)

**People Acting for Community Together** (Miami PACT), a multi-faith organizing group, was founded in Miami-Dade County in 1988. After successfully organizing to improve neighborhood safety and demolish crack houses, PACT established an education committee and won a substantial investment in improved reading instruction after immigrant parents raised the issue in congregation meetings.

For more information: [www.miamipact.org](http://www.miamipact.org)

**The Philadelphia Student Union** (PSU) was formed in 1995 by a group of high school students who realized that young people needed to be involved in school reform. PSU started as a small group of magnet high school students but quickly attracted students from large neighborhood high schools as well. From an early focus on textbooks and building conditions, PSU has since won major citywide high school improvements.

For more information: [www.phillystudentunion.org](http://www.phillystudentunion.org)

organized parents – sometimes partnered with teachers – hold schools accountable as public institutions that are crucial to equal opportunity.

Organizing begins with the premise that the people closest to local schools – parents, students, and teachers – are in the best position to make schooling decisions and to sustain educational improvement. While research has shown that parent and community participation are essential to school improvement (Henderson & Mapp 2002), many schools, especially those in low-income and working-class communities, fall far short of meaningful engagement. Organizing develops the relational culture and shared leadership necessary for parents and students to engage as full partners in school decision making. By developing a broad base of informed, capable leaders with deep community roots, organizing groups ensure that educational policy and practice reflect local knowledge and lived experience.

# Building a Base and Developing Leaders

One of the core activities of organizing is building a broad base of members and developing their capacity to engage in collective action to improve schools. For education organizing, this means ensuring that public school parents and students – and sometimes teachers – are leading school improvement campaigns. Ongoing attention to base building is especially important in education organizing, since there is natural turnover as students (and their parents) move from one school to the next and finally graduate.

Often, the parents who have had the worst experiences with schools – both as students and as parents – are the least connected to formal school events or organizations. Immigrant parents' expectations about the relationships between families and schools may differ from how U.S. schools structure opportunities for parent involvement; for example, parents from many other countries would be reluctant to challenge a school's decision about a student (Delgado-Gaitan 2004). That's why it's important not to limit recruitment efforts to schools, but rather to reach out to parents through neighborhood organizations, after-school and childcare programs, congregations, and door-knocking.

## EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

### Creating Effective Leaders

After Minnesota Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (MN NOC) successfully mobilized to prevent the closure of North High School in Minneapolis, leaders decided to develop a more comprehensive vision for school change and greatly expand their base of parents and community members working on education. MN NOC worked with AISR to design a parent survey, which leaders took to community meetings, festivals, and door-to-door. More than 400 parents completed the survey, and more than 150 people attended community meetings to discuss the findings. Many of these people have committed to working with MN NOC to improve local schools.

For more information: [www.mnnoc.org](http://www.mnnoc.org)

The Southwest affiliates of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) have a long history of work in education. In addition to regular five-day and ten-day statewide leadership trainings, the IAF plans shorter seminars and trainings on education funding, high-stakes testing, and other issues for parents, community members, and educators from the network's Alliance Schools (see the sidebar in the section Forging Relationships with Schools and Educators on page 15).

For more information: [www.industrialareasfoundation.org](http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org)

Education organizing groups use a range of strategies to reach new members and build and maintain a base. These include:

- Distributing flyers outside of schools and door-knocking in the surrounding neighborhoods.
- Recruiting parents and students through after-school and neighborhood programs.
- Reaching out to parent-teacher associations.

- Organizing neighborhood walks or home visits, in which teams of teachers and parent leaders go to students' homes to meet families, learn about their concerns, and recruit new leaders. These strategies depend on good relationships with schools and teachers.
- Holding public meetings, candidate forums, or press conferences to focus public attention on education problems and solutions.
- Reaching out to young people through student organizations, after-school programs, and community-based organizations.

Leadership development in education organizing is not substantially different than any good leadership development. To develop leaders' command of education issues, many groups develop specific trainings and curricula that cover the structure of the school system, the history of public education, and specific school reform issues. See the sections on choosing issues, choosing the right scale of organizing, and gathering data and conducting research for more information about what leaders need to know.

## Choosing the Right Issues and Developing a Platform

In most community organizing practice, groups choose transparent issues that resonate broadly with their members and are quickly winnable. Initial victories on specific issues build a group's experience and power and form the basis of more complex campaigns over time. Thus within education organizing, groups often tackle problems like outdated textbooks, crumbling facilities, or safety as initial campaigns. These issues have the advantage of being obvious to parents, widely understood, and generally not controversial – it's hard for principals or administrators to make a case for not fixing dangerous conditions or making sure students have textbooks.

While safety and facilities are important for schools to be able to do their job, improving student achievement requires tackling more complex, nuanced issues of teaching and learning. These instructional campaigns require a deeper understanding of education issues and considerable data analysis and research. Issues that involve how teachers and administrators work require careful relationship building, because they run the risk of sparking resistance from educators who feel that their professional discretion is being challenged. Yet tackling issues like teacher quality, curriculum,

and discipline is crucial for making real improvements in educational opportunity. Groups have found that initial victories on the more tangible, less controversial issues build trust and lay the groundwork for collaboration with educators on more complex campaigns (see the sections on data and research and relationship building).

While there is a lot of variation in education organizing campaigns, there are some common issues that are being tackled around the country. Some examples of issue areas across education organizing groups include:

- focusing on “smaller” and more concrete issues like school facilities, textbooks, or the safety of students walking to and from school
- demanding greater accountability for student performance in a particular area, like reading or English as a second language
- advocating for a specific educational program or whole school reform model
- developing a comprehensive proposal for school restructuring or systemic districtwide reform
- changing school or district leadership, such as the removal of an inadequate principal or supporting new candidates for the school board

## Building a Campaign For Quality Teachers

- improving school-family relationships through activities like teacher home visits, or creating greater roles for parents in school decision making
- joining a national network or campaign focused on one specific education issue like school finance, school discipline, or school turnaround
- developing proposals to start new schools

Particularly challenging to education reform is that each of these issues must be addressed at a specific level of the school system. Because there are so many potential policy targets – for example, school-level discipline policies, districtwide curriculum decisions, state funding decisions, or federal programs providing targeted assistance – education organizing groups must take time to research their local context and see how it fits into the larger school system picture.

In the 1990s, **Illinois ACORN** (now **Action Now**) worked with local foundations and intermediaries to develop trainings on education issues for parents serving on local school councils. As they delved into data, leaders pinpointed huge numbers of teacher vacancies and a shortage of certified teachers as a major impediment to local school improvement. ACORN and district leaders collaborated to improve teacher recruitment in ACORN neighborhoods. But many of the newly recruited certified teachers seemed unprepared for teaching in low-income communities of color, and large numbers left in their first year.

ACORN leaders admired a program developed by another Chicago organizing group, the **Logan Square Neighborhood Association** (LSNA), which helped local parents with roots in the community complete their undergraduate degrees and become certified bilingual teachers in local schools. ACORN and LSNA worked with other organizing groups, the teachers union, district officials, and other partners to develop a statewide “Grow Your Own” model to help local parents and teaching assistants become highly qualified teachers with deep roots and commitment to neighborhood schools. The program was implemented through state legislation and has received more than \$14 million in appropriations.

For more information: [www.growyourownteachers.org](http://www.growyourownteachers.org)

After a successful campaign to develop a Lead Teacher Program, the **New York City Coalition for Educational Justice** (CEJ) member groups began to consider their next campaign. CEJ members concluded that successful college completion, rather than simply high school graduation, was critical to developing the skills and capacities the city’s students needed for successful careers in an increasingly global economy. Reviewing the data, CEJ members discovered that more than 60 percent of incoming ninth-graders, most of them African American and Latino, entered high school performing below the state standard in reading. Through research, CEJ leaders also learned that middle grade schools had long been defined as the critical turning point in students’ educational careers, but had largely been ignored by the past New York City reform efforts. Studies showed that students who did poorly in the middle grades were unlikely to graduate from high school. CEJ members became convinced that transforming the city’s middle grade schools was critical to improving the school system’s capacity to prepare students for success in college and developed a platform for middle grades reform.

For more information: [www.nyccej.org](http://www.nyccej.org)

# Choosing the Right Scale for Organizing

Organizing often starts at an individual school or in a cluster of schools in a specific neighborhood. Parents and students relate most directly to their own school, and schools are often the best places to recruit new members and to build relationships with individual teachers and principals. Schools are also where the daily business of teaching and learning takes place.

But district policies, practices, and resources are also instrumental in shaping what goes on in individual schools. Organizing groups often discover, in the course of a campaign, that a school can't respond to demands to implement a new curriculum or engage parents in different ways without changing district policy. Often an individual school lacks the capacity, funding, or will to make changes without district intervention. Sometimes groups find that large numbers of schools are impacted by the same issues and that changing policy at the district level is the best way to improve education for all the district's students.

State policy and resource allocation also plays a large role in education. States are responsible for developing standardized assessments, establishing teacher quality standards, and providing a large proportion of school funding.

Increasingly, states are shaping local curricular policy as well. Some organizing groups have had success in influencing education policy at the state level by passing legislation to create new programs or new funding streams for local schools, usually working through coalitions of organizing groups and other allies.

While the federal government contributes a relatively small percentage of school funding, federal policy greatly impacts schools with high percentages of low-income students. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, currently known as No Child Left Behind) requires that states set standards, test students in certain grades, and intervene in schools that fail to meet improvement targets. In addition to establishing federal accountability guidelines, ESEA sets policies and provides resources for many different education programs. For example, ESEA governs the Title I program, which distributes federal funding to districts and schools with high concentrations of students living in poverty. Under Title I, the federal Department of Education makes School Improvement Grants to the lowest-performing five percent of schools in each state that agree to implement certain "turnaround" models. Title IV of ESEA includes the Safe and Drug-Free

Schools and Communities Act, which provides state and local grants for violence and drug-use prevention programs. Federal law also dictates the rights of students with disabilities through the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA).

Deciding on the appropriate scale of organizing depends on the issue, the groups' size, power, and access to allies, and the priorities of potential targets. Many groups have discovered that working at several levels simultaneously – organizing parents at the school level while also mounting district- or state-level campaigns – is the best strategy for achieving their goals. Some considerations include:

- **The issue:** Does it impact an individual school, several schools, or all schools across the district or state? Is it better resolved at the state level so that it impacts multiple districts?
- **The structure of decision making:** Is school policy centralized under a mayor or decided by an elected school board? Are there mechanisms, like local school councils, for parent input? Do schools have significant autonomy, or does the district make most decisions about policy and practice? Is the issue at stake subject to state law or policy?

FIGURE 1. Local, state, and federal policy actors

- The group's power: Does the group have sufficient base, power, and media clout to mount a citywide campaign? Are there other organizing groups, unions, school reform organizations, or elected officials who can work in coalition on the issue within the city or across the state?

For a summary of different policy actors and their responsibilities at the local, state, and federal levels, see Figure 1.

Level	Policy Actors	Responsibilities
LOCAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◊ School board</li> <li>◊ Superintendent and staff</li> <li>◊ Mayors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raise funds</li> <li>• Build and maintain facilities</li> <li>• Hire, assign, provide professional development to, and evaluate administrators, teachers, and staff</li> <li>• Negotiate with unions to set salaries and working conditions</li> <li>• Establish basic operational rules for schools</li> </ul> <p><i>Under NCLB, since 2001:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administer achievement testing</li> <li>• Report to state and federal governments how funds are spent, student achievement, and other required information</li> <li>• Publish and distribute public "report cards" about each school</li> </ul>
STATE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◊ Legislature</li> <li>◊ Governor</li> <li>◊ School board</li> <li>◊ Chief state school officer</li> <li>◊ State department of education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Certify teachers</li> <li>• Provide funding for schools</li> <li>• Collect data from schools</li> <li>• Report civil rights data to U.S. Department of Education</li> <li>• Intervene when local school systems experience fiscal, management, or other crises</li> </ul> <p><i>Under NCLB, since 2001:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish curriculum standards, testing programs, and accountability mechanisms</li> <li>• Ensure that each classroom is staffed by a "highly qualified" teacher</li> <li>• Report testing and teacher data to U.S. Department of Education</li> <li>• Turn around failing schools</li> </ul>
FEDERAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◊ Congress</li> <li>◊ President</li> <li>◊ Secretary of Education</li> <li>◊ U.S. Department of Education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spur states and schools to meet expectations</li> <li>• Fund and oversee support programs for ESL, low-income students, and students with disabilities</li> <li>• Collect basic data about enrollment, staffing, funding, etc.</li> <li>• Monitor states' and schools' compliance with federal civil rights laws</li> </ul> <p><i>Under NCLB—Since 2001:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deny federal funds to states that do not hold schools accountable for "annual yearly progress" in achievement test scores and graduation rates, or comply with other NCLB provisions</li> <li>• Collect accountability data on student achievement, high school graduation, and "highly qualified teachers"</li> <li>• Require that federal funds be spent only on programs proven effectively with "scientifically based" research</li> </ul>

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NOTE: Adapted from Concept Table 11.1,  
Oakes and Lipton 2006, p. 427.

## Statewide Education Reform

In response to inequities in education resources, a coalition of community and advocacy organizations sued the State of California in 2000. Known as the *Williams* lawsuit, the plaintiffs charged that the state was not providing California students with equal access to safe school facilities, necessary learning materials (books, lab supplies, etc.), or quality teachers. The settlement reached in the case included almost a billion dollars toward resources for the state's lowest-performing schools and a new process for holding school districts and the state responsible for providing students with education resources. In this case, the community organizers were involved from the beginning of the lawsuit through implementation. Community organizers in California continue to use the *Williams* complaint process as a tool for engaging parents in under-resourced schools.

For more information: [www.decentschools.com](http://www.decentschools.com)



## National Education Reform

Realizing that many low-income communities of color are facing similar education problems, thirty-five local, state, and national community organizations from around the country are joining forces to collectively impact federal education policy. Formed in 2010, **Communities for Excellent Public Schools** (CEPS) is focusing their first campaign on the policies to turn around the nation's lowest-performing schools. Listening to members in communities and working with policy and legal experts, CEPS is lobbying for a model of school turnaround that starts with research-based education practices and includes extensive community engagement. Though new, CEPS's work led to the addition of language around the importance of community engagement in the rules and guidance for the Department of Education's School Improvement Grants.

For more information: [www.ceps-ourschools.org](http://www.ceps-ourschools.org)

# Building Power through Alliances and Coalitions

Building sufficient power to influence education policy, especially at the district, state, or federal level, often requires joining forces with other organizing groups and other constituencies. Working through coalitions of multiple stakeholders demonstrates broad support for the demands that organizing groups advance and minimizes the chances of substantial opposition.

Many district-level – and state-level – victories have been the result of cross-constituency coalition building. The Grow Your Own Teacher campaign described in the sidebar Examples from the Field: Building a Campaign For Quality Teachers on page 7, for example, was led by multiple community organizing groups, teachers unions, other labor unions, university officials, district officials, and state legislators. As the education organizing field has grown, groups have joined forces across the country to develop shared platforms and build regional and national campaigns. These networks are often focused around a specific issue, such as school discipline. They allow groups to share resources and strategies and to ensure that their local work is aligned with platforms for state-level and national campaigns.

Different types of organizations that share the same education

## EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

### Building Equity-Driven Coalitions

In Los Angeles, the **Community Coalition**, the **Alliance for a Better Community**, and **Inner City Struggle**, groups with deep roots in local communities of color, convened a citywide coalition of more than thirty organizations – advocacy groups, social service agencies, school reform organizations, elected officials, unions, and university-based researchers – called **Communities for Educational Equity** (CEE). CEE won a city council resolution making the college preparatory curriculum mandatory for all Los Angeles high school students.

For more information: <http://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/about/alliances/the-communities-for-educational-equity-cee>

**Communities for Excellent Public Schools** (CEPS), a national coalition of thirty-five parent, student, and community organizing groups, convened in 2010 to push for robust, research-based federal intervention in the lowest-performing schools with meaningful community voice.

For more information: [www.ceps-ourschools.org](http://www.ceps-ourschools.org)

The **Dignity in Schools Campaign** (DSC) unites youth-led and parent-led organizing groups, civil rights organizations, advocates, and policy organizations to end the school pushout crisis and to advance alternatives to zero-tolerance discipline policies across the country. DSC supports groups' local and state work on discipline policies and organizes at the federal level around ESEA reauthorization.

For more information: [www.dignityinschools.org](http://www.dignityinschools.org)

equity goals can bring resources, knowledge, and data about particular issues – and the respect of elected officials and policy-makers – to a campaign. Education organizing groups have had success working with a range of stakeholders:

- Some organizing groups have cultivated relationships with local teachers unions, recognizing that although teachers and parents have often been pitted against each other, both constituencies have a long-term interest in improving the conditions and capacity of struggling schools.
- Other labor unions usually include many public school parents as members. Their infrastructure and familiarity with organizing strategies makes them natural allies.
- Parent-teacher associations and local education foundations often share the goals of community organizing groups. While they often have less experience with base-building and public action, they typically have relationships with public officials and are respected advocates.
- Civil rights organizations such as ACLU and NAACP chapters, advocacy organizations focused on education or on children's welfare, and agencies that provide direct services often have research and data analysis capacity, among other resources.

## Gathering Data and Conducting Research

Research is an integral part of the community organizing cycle; organizing groups use research and data at several campaign stages. In education organizing, data and research are particularly important. School reform work is complex, slow, and often controversial. Schools with a history of failure often have deeply dysfunctional cultures that are very resistant to change; thus understanding each school's specific struggles and needs is critical to developing strategic solutions. Because of the jargon and professional expertise that many education policymakers utilize, parents and communities often feel excluded. It is important for community organizing leaders to be able to analyze reforms and speak knowledgably about education issues.

Because education is so complex, data that demystifies what schools are doing, what resources they have, and what results they achieve are especially useful. Data analyses that compare programs and outcomes in well-resourced schools with those in struggling schools make a particularly compelling public case for equity and attract media attention to campaigns.

In the last decade, in part because of the requirements of ESEA, the quantity and quality of education data available to the public has

vastly increased. ESEA mandates that data on school demographics and outcomes be reported yearly by school, district, and state, disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, special education status, and English proficiency. Data that can be accessed through district and state websites includes:

- Demographic data on students, including race, gender, poverty (expressed as students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch), English language learners (ELLs), and students receiving special education services.
- Demographic data on teachers, including years of teaching experience and the percentage that meet state requirements for being "highly qualified."
- Fiscal data, including per-pupil spending and often actual expenditures for individual schools and the school district, broken down by categories such as personnel, operations costs, facilities, maintenance, and debt service.
- Outcome data, including attendance, the percentage of students at each level of achievement on standardized tests, promotion rates from grade to grade, graduation and dropout rates at the high school level, and sometimes SAT and ACT results and college enrollment percentages.

Under No Child Left Behind, states must establish yearly goals for each school and district on standardized tests by subgroup (race, gender, ELL, special education) called Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and report success in meeting these goals.

- School climate and discipline data, including the number and type of violent incidents; suspension, expulsion, and other disciplinary data; and student, parent, and teacher surveys on school climate. Federal law requires that for students with disabilities, schools report disciplinary data disaggregated by race, gender, language, and disability status. Disciplinary data reporting for non-disabled students varies widely by state and district. The U.S. Education Department's Office of Civil Rights conducts periodic surveys on disciplinary rates by race, gender, and other status.

Districts and states must meet minimum requirements in data reporting, but such data are not equally transparent. Education reform nonprofits and think tanks often publish education data and produce data analyses on issues relevant to education organizing campaigns. Universities and local research institutes often produce state- and district-level analyses. Some places to look:

- United States Education Dashboard ([www.dashboard.ed.gov](http://www.dashboard.ed.gov))
- The Education Trust and Ed Trust-West ([www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org) and [www.edtrust.org/west](http://www.edtrust.org/west))

- U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights ([www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html))
- UCLA Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles ([www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu](http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu))
- Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University ([www.annenberginstitute.org](http://www.annenberginstitute.org))
- Research for Action ([www.researchforaction.org](http://www.researchforaction.org))
- UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) ([www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu](http://www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu))
- *Education Week* ([www.edweek.org](http://www.edweek.org))
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation maintains a national “Kids Count” database of child well-being indicators and funds nonprofits in each state to produce more detailed reports on child well-being, including education. ([www.kidscount.org](http://www.kidscount.org))

But research includes more than just data on student performance. Groups use policy analysis, read written reports, books, and articles, conduct their own evaluations, and consult with outside academic experts in every stage of their work. Common research and data usage includes:

- Training for organizers and leaders on how to access and analyze basic school data; local curricula, standards, and assessment; how the school system is structured and who sets policy; and current reform



issues such as federal school turnaround policy, extended learning time, and college readiness.

- Surveys of students, parents, and teachers to identify shared issues and highlight perceptions of school quality, instructional rigor, safety, and student-teacher relationships, for example. Surveys are often used for both gathering data and recruiting new members.
- School visits to high-performing schools or to schools implementing a program or model the group is interested in. School visits to well-resourced

#### EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

### Using Data to Boost Organizing Efforts

**Southern ECHO** produces a range of maps, charts, and other publications distilling Mississippi education data and research. For example, they produce “education issues maps” that depict demographic and educational data and allow communities to compare their data to other districts in the state; “educational issues posters” visualize policy and historical developments.

To see a map example, go to: [http://southernecho.org/s/?page\\_id=10#9](http://southernecho.org/s/?page_id=10#9)

In addition to customized reports developed with individual community organizing groups, **UCLA IDEA** produces an annual California Educational Opportunity Report on the conditions and outcomes of learning across the state. The report draws on publicly available data as well as surveys and interviews with educators.

To view the report, go to: <http://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/educational-opportunity-report/california-state-report>

**Padres y Jovenes Unidos**, a multi-generational education organizing group in Denver, regularly publishes research reports on its campaign issues. This February the group worked with researchers at the University of Colorado to develop a report on middle grades school reform laying out a roadmap for improvement.

To view the report, go to:  
[http://padresunidos.org/sites/default/files/Padres Unidos Middle School Report\\_FINAL\\_2010\\_nodate.pdf](http://padresunidos.org/sites/default/files/Padres Unidos Middle School Report_FINAL_2010_nodate.pdf)

and successful schools help expand parents’ and students’ educational vision, as well as their understanding of the vast inequities in public education.

- Research actions in which small groups of leaders meet with educators, policymakers, or experts to explore aspects of a campaign or learn more about particular schools.
- Keeping up with trends in education reform, innovative programs, changes in education policy and funding, and school board or mayoral elections in order to keep abreast of the education landscape and take advantage of opportunities to move a campaign forward.

Many organizing groups form relationships with university faculty and research centers to expand their research and data analysis capacities and reach out to experts on particular issues or reform models to inform their demands. AISR’s Center for Education Organizing, UCLA’s IDEA, and Research for Action in Philadelphia have particular expertise in supporting education organizing through research, data, and policy analysis. Nonprofit organizations and advocacy organizations with complementary reform agendas are also important allies in gathering and analyzing data and research. (See the resource list at the end of the brief for more information on these institutes and organizations.)

# Forging Relationships with Schools and Educators

Developing allies is crucial to all good organizing, but relationships are particularly important in education organizing. Education reform is so difficult and complex that organizations must develop relationships that will allow them to stay engaged with schools and districts over time. Developing a sense of schools' culture, needs, priorities, and issues – as well as good data about what is happening inside of classrooms – depends on developing the trust of principals and teachers.

Besides facilitating education campaigns, good relationships between schools and parents are important in their own right. A substantial body of research has demonstrated that schools perform better when parents are engaged in meaningful ways in schools and when schools can draw on the social capital of families and community institutions (Henderson & Mapp 2002; Sebring et al. 2006). But schools often struggle to engage families in ways that go beyond school support, fundraising, volunteering, or homework help. This is particularly true for schools in low- and moderate-income communities and communities of color, where teachers often live outside the school's neighborhood and come from different class and racial backgrounds than their students.

## EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

### Partnering with Educators

**Industrial Areas Foundation** (IAF) affiliates in Texas developed the "Alliance Schools" model of school-based organizing to deepen parent engagement in local schools and support school improvement campaigns. Schools partner with an IAF affiliate to learn organizing skills and build a "core team" of school leaders, teachers, parents, and community members. One-on-one meetings, house meetings, parent coffees, and neighborhood walks become part of school culture. Alliance Schools often join districtwide and statewide education organizing campaigns.

For more information: [www.industrialareasfoundation.org](http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org)

**Sacramento ACT**, working with the school district and teachers union, developed the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project out of a belief that parents and teachers are equally important partners and that strong channels of communication were important. The model trains and compensates teachers to make home visits to meet with parents in a setting in which the teacher doesn't hold all the power. The project has established a separate nonprofit organization that helps community organizing groups, districts, and unions in other cities establish home visit programs.

For more information: [www.pthvp.org](http://www.pthvp.org)

Community organizing groups can play a unique and important role in bridging this divide. Organizing is, at core, about relationships, and organizing methodology provides strategies for developing mutually accountable personal relationships. Through one-on-one conversations and house meetings, community members and teachers can begin to identify shared interests and see each other as allies. The

leadership, public speaking, and facilitation skills that organized parents develop, along with their fluency in education issues, can help shift teachers' perceptions of what parents are capable of. Organizing is an excellent vehicle for building authentic partnerships between schools' two central constituencies – families and teachers. Community organizing emphasizes shared, democratic decision making and provides a



model for parent participation in schools on an equal footing with educators.

Organizing groups have developed a range of strategies for building relationships with teachers and principals:

- Regular meetings between parent leaders and educators.
- “Neighborhood walks” during which parent and community leaders take teachers on tours of the neighborhood surrounding a school. These walks help teachers feel more knowledgeable about and connected to the community; introduce them to local cultural institutions; and help them to see parents as knowledgeable resources.
- Home visits, in which small teams of parents and teachers visit families at home to share information about the school’s curriculum, answer questions and learn about families’ interests and concerns, identify potential leaders, and encourage participation in school events.
- The development of family-school partnership committees or organizing committees in which parent and community leaders, teachers, and administrators meet regularly to plan events, discuss student achievement, and develop organizing campaigns for school improvement.

- The cultivation of relationships with district officials, school board members, and other decision-makers through one-on-one meetings, research meetings, and public events.

Community organizing groups have demanded, and won, seats on district and state committees and formal roles in implementing and monitoring reforms.

# Education Organizing Resources

## Intermediaries and Research Organizations

### **Annenberg Institute for School Reform's Center for Education Organizing (CEO)**

The Center for Education Organizing supports and amplifies local and national demands for educational justice in underserved communities. The CEO integrates the expertise of a university-based research center, years of on-the-ground experience supporting education organizing, and our long-standing reputation as a seasoned convener of diverse education stakeholders.

[www.annenberginstitute.org/educationorganizing](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/educationorganizing)

### **Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing (FCYO)**

FCYO is a collection of national, regional, and local grantmakers and youth organizing practitioners dedicated to advancing youth organizing as a strategy for youth development and social transformation. Their mission is to cultivate resources for young people taking action to build healthy and equitable communities. They bridge funders and organizers to support youth organizing and its commitment to systemic change and social justice.

[www.fcyo.org](http://www.fcyo.org)

### **American Education Research Association: Grassroots Youth and Community Organizing Special Interest Group (GYCO SIG)**

The GCYO SIG aims to advance research on community and youth organizing, particularly in low-income communities and communities of color. They work to build a research community that engages with practitioners in organizing groups, educational institutions, and policy-making circles and foster research that examines the ways in which organizing efforts affect school improvement and educational equity, youth development, community/democratic revitalization, and social justice.

[www.aera.net/Default.aspx?menu\\_id=546&id=12338](http://www.aera.net/Default.aspx?menu_id=546&id=12338)

### **National Education Policy Center**

The mission of the National Education Policy Center is to produce and disseminate high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. They are guided by the belief that the democratic governance of public education is strengthened when policies are based on sound evidence.

[www.nepc.colorado.edu](http://www.nepc.colorado.edu)

### **Research for Action, Philadelphia (RFA)**

RFA seeks to use research as the basis for the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for traditionally underserved students. Their work is designed to strengthen public schools and postsecondary institutions; provide research-based recommendations to policymakers, practitioners, and the public at the local, state, and national levels; and enrich the civic and community dialogue about public education.

[www.researchforaction.org](http://www.researchforaction.org)

### **School Victories, a project of the Education Law Center, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh**

School Victories is a tool for advocates, educators, and groups to plan, share, and inspire advocacy and organizing efforts aimed at improving public schools and creating excellent opportunities to learn for all students.

[www.schoolvictories.org](http://www.schoolvictories.org)

### **Southern ECHO, Jackson, Mississippi**

Southern Echo is a leadership development, education, and training organization working to develop effective accountable grassroots leadership in the African American communities in rural Mississippi and the surrounding region through comprehensive training and technical assistance programs.

[www.southernecho.org](http://www.southernecho.org)

### **UCLA Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles**

The mission of the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles is to help renew the civil rights movement by bridging the worlds of ideas and action, to be a preeminent source of intellectual capital within that movement, and to deepen the understanding of the issues that must be resolved to achieve racial and ethnic equity as society moves through the great transformation of the twenty-first century.

[www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu](http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu)

### **UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, Los Angeles (IDEA)**

IDEA is a research institute seeking to understand and challenge pervasive racial and social class inequalities in education. In addition to conducting independent research and policy analysis, IDEA supports educators, public officials, advocates, community activists, and young people as they design, conduct, and use research to make high-quality public schools and successful college participation routine occurrences in all communities.

[www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu](http://www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu)

## **Research and Case Studies**

### **"Community Organizing as a Reform Strategy"**

By the Annenberg Institute for School Reform

AISR researchers examined the growing body of literature on community organizing to understand how this strategy fits into systemic education reform. Includes a review of research on community organizing for school reform and a detailed directory of organizations active in education organizing and community engagement in New England.

[www.annenberginstitute.org/publication/  
community-organizing-education-reform-  
strategy-series](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/publication/community-organizing-education-reform-strategy-series)

### ***Community Organizing for School Improvement in the South Bronx***

By Eric Zachary and shola olatoye

The case study narrates the development of New Settlement Apartment's Parent Action Committee, the organizing strategies they employed in their efforts to improve the school's outcomes, and the assistance provided by the Community Involvement Program of New York University's Institute for Education and Social Policy.

[www.nyu.edu/steinhardt/iesp/cip/IESP\\_CIPcases-  
study\\_new.pdf](http://www.nyu.edu/steinhardt/iesp/cip/IESP_CIPcases-study_new.pdf)

### ***Confronting Systemic Inequality in Schools***

By Kevin Welner and Amy Farley for the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy

This is the first in a series of Philanthropy at Its Best reports from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) that invites grantmakers that focus on specific issues to rethink their funding strategies to generate the greatest impact. It attempts to answer the questions: How can philanthropy be more effective at deploying its limited resources to help reform and improve our school systems? How can philanthropy help break the cycle of persistent inequality in access and opportunities among underserved students in our communities?

[ww.ncrp.org/paib/education-philanthropy](http://www.ncrp.org/paib/education-philanthropy)

### **"Organized Communities, Stronger Schools"**

By the Annenberg Institute for School Reform

With funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Annenberg Institute researchers conducted a six-year research study – the first of its kind – to examine the impacts of education organizing on school capacity and student outcomes. The study looked at organizing efforts by residents of seven urban communities across the country to improve their public schools..

[www.annenberginstitute.org/publication/organized-communities-stronger-schools](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/publication/organized-communities-stronger-schools)

### **"Strong Neighborhoods, Strong Schools: A Series of Reports of the Findings of the Indicators Project on Education Organizing"**

By Elaine Simon, Eva Gold, and Chris Brown for the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform

This report series, produced through the Education Organizing Indicators Project, presents a methodology for documenting the contribution of community organizing to school reform. The series includes an overview report, executive summary, a user's guide, and an appendix containing the five case studies.

[www.researchforaction.org/publication-listing/?id=102](http://www.researchforaction.org/publication-listing/?id=102)

## **Webinars**

### **District-Level Systems Change Initiative Webinar Series**

Hosted by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, with support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation

These two webinars, "Tackling the Challenges of Rural Community Organizing" and "Working Together to Create Meaningful Parent Engagement" feature moderated discussions with staff and leaders of several experienced community organizing groups and explore strategies for education reform work. Each webinar includes a video, PowerPoint, summary, and resource list.

<http://annenberginstitute.org/project/support-organizing-and-engagement-new-england>

## **Films**

### **A Community Concern**

Produced by Susan Zeig (2010)

Across the United States, graduation rates in most urban districts still remain between 50 and 60 percent. *A Community Concern* is a film about people who refuse to accept the system's failures and are working for change. The film documents the education work of Oakland Community Organizations, the Boston Parent Organizing Network, and Sistas and Brothas United in the Bronx.

[www.acommunityconcern.org](http://www.acommunityconcern.org)

### **Parent Power**

Produced by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2011)

Through the voices of parents, *Parent Power* chronicles fifteen years of effective parent organizing in New York City – organizing that has stopped budget cuts, increased school funding, and led to the adoption of a citywide lead teacher program.

[www.annenberginstitute.org/parentpower](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/parentpower)

## Books

### ***Community Organizing for Stronger Schools: Strategies and Successes***

By Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister (Harvard Education Press, 2009)

Drawing on a six-year national study, *Community Organizing for Stronger Schools* examines the role of organizing in building social and political capital and improving educational outcomes for students. The authors explore strategic choices and organizational capacity and consider how community organizing for school reform can support increased civic engagement.

[www.hepg.org/hep](http://www.hepg.org/hep)

### ***Community Organizing for Urban School Reform***

By Dennis Shirley (University of Texas Press, 1997)

Using a case study approach, Dennis Shirley describes how working-class parents, public school teachers, clergy, social workers, business partners, and a host of other engaged citizens have worked to improve education in inner-city schools. Their combined efforts are linked through the community organizations of the Industrial Areas Foundation, which have developed a network of over seventy “Alliance Schools” in poor and working-class neighborhoods throughout Texas.

<http://www.utexas.edu/utpress/>

### ***Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy***

By Mark Warren (Princeton University Press, 2001)

In this book, Mark Warren argues that the key to revitalizing democracy lies in connecting politics to community institutions and the values that sustain them and that by doing so, the Industrial Areas Foundation network has built an organized, multiracial constituency with the power to advance desperately needed social policies.

<http://press.princeton.edu>

### ***Learning Power: Organizing for Education and Justice***

By Jeannie Oakes & John Rogers with Martin Lipton (Teachers College Press, 2006)

Learning Power documents an approach to school reform that includes grassroots public activism informed by social inquiry; activist young people, teachers, parents, and community organizations working to improve schools in our nation’s poorest neighborhoods; and a comprehensive critique of the prevailing logic of American schooling and an alternative logic based on justice and participatory democracy.

<http://store.tcpress.com/>

### ***A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform***

Edited by Mark Warren and Karen Mapp (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Based on a comprehensive national study, the book presents case studies of prominent organizing efforts in Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles, Denver, San Jose, and the Mississippi Delta. The authors show how organizing groups build the participation and leadership of parents and students so they can become powerful actors in school improvement efforts. They also identify promising ways to overcome divisions and create the collaborations between educators and community residents required for deep and sustainable school reform.

[www.oup.com](http://www.oup.com)

***Organizing for Educational Justice: The Campaign for Public School Reform in the South Bronx***

By Michael Fabricant (University of Minnesota Press, 2010)

In *Organizing for Educational Justice*, Michael B. Fabricant tells the story of the Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 Schools (CC9) from its origins in 1995 as a small group of concerned parents to the citywide application of its reform agenda – concentrating on targeted investment in the development of teacher capacity – ten years later. Drawing on in-depth interviews with participants, analysis of qualitative data, and access to meetings and archives, Fabricant evaluates CC9's innovative approach to organizing and collaboration with other stakeholders.

<http://www.upress.umn.edu/>

***Public Engagement for Public Education***

Edited by Marion Orr and John Rogers (Stanford University Press, 2010)

*Public Engagement for Public Education* speaks to the potential for students, parents, community members, and civic leaders to join forces and create more equitable schooling. Such engagement can expand access to quality educational pathways which in turn paves the way to a stronger voice in society and the promise of the American dream. If segments of society are blocked access to those pathways, the book argues, nothing less than the health of American democracy is at stake.

<http://www.sup.org>

***Valley Interfaith and School Reform: Organizing for Power in South Texas***

By Dennis Shirley (University of Texas Press, 2002)

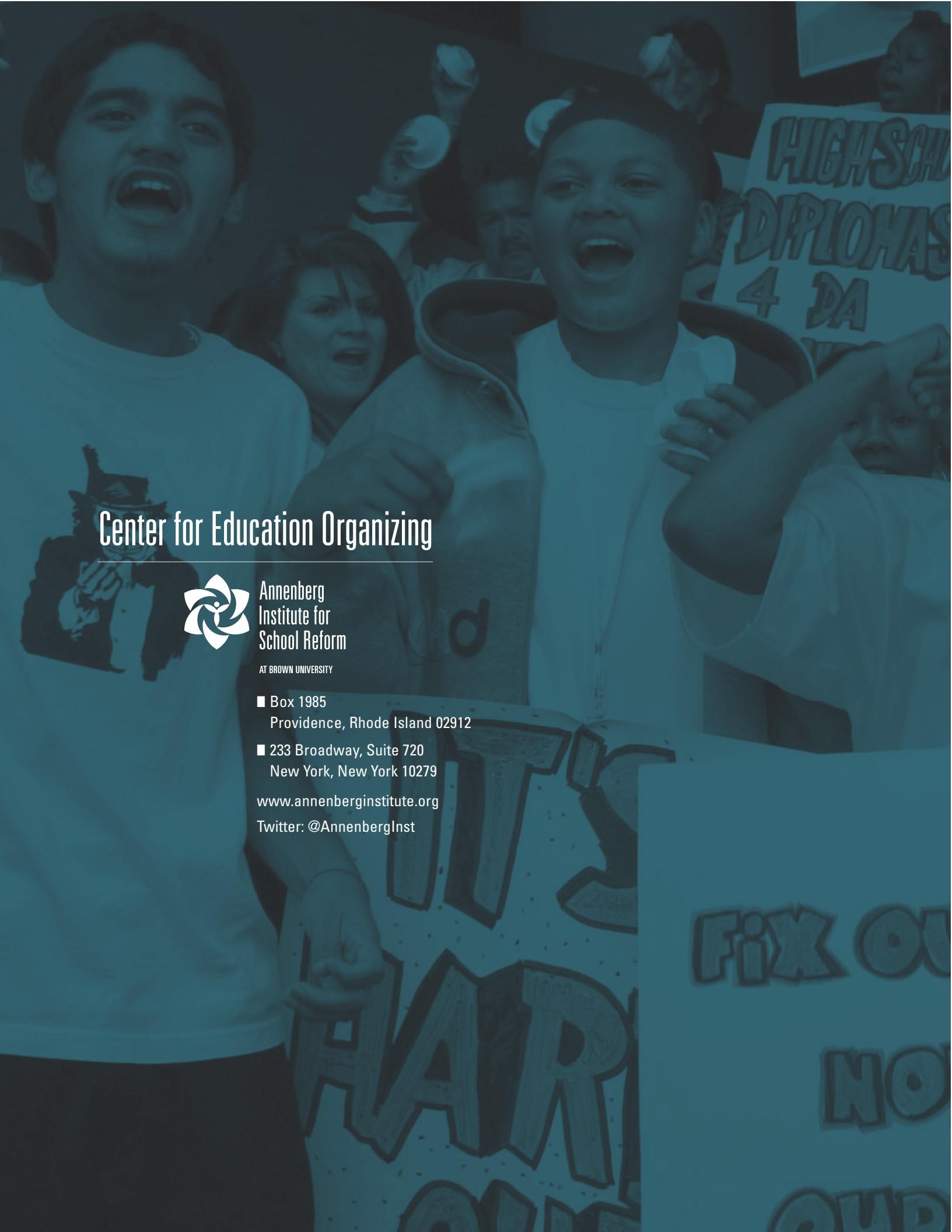
This book focuses around case studies of three schools that have benefited from the reform efforts of Valley Interfaith, which works to develop community leadership and boost academic achievement. He follows the efforts of teachers, parents, school administrators, clergy, and community activists to take charge of their schools and their communities and describes the effects of these efforts on students' school performance and testing results.

<http://www.utexas.edu/utpress>

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